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# THE MUNICIPAL PROBLEMS OF LONDON.

BY THE RIGHT HON. THE LORD MAYOR OF LONDON.

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THE statement of Lord Beaconsfield that "in political institutions are embodied the experiences of a race" is true also of English municipal institutions. "The combination of voluntary organization, with administrative machinery, marks (according to the high authority of Bishop Stubbs) the English municipal system from its earliest days;" and it has been for long ages not only a training-school for the leaders of the people, but also a means of interesting and educating ordinary inhabitants in the affairs of their municipalities.

The beneficent effects upon this country, of the custom of local self-government thus rooted in municipal antiquity, were eulogized by Mr. Gladstone at the Guildhall of the city of London, some years ago, in language not to be forgotten. He said :

"The practice of local self-government, if at least I have any faculty of judging the causes of the greatness of our country, has contributed, in a degree inferior to no other cause, to the eminence and power to which it has attained."

In England and America, the two great homes of the Anglo-Saxon race, are to be found municipal institutions based upon that principle of free popular election, which the political system of those countries also rests upon ; and whatever changes the future may bring to their corporate structure, no doubt can be entertained that the free play and development of the principles of popular election and local self-government, by the people in their various municipal communities, ought to be ever safeguarded with the utmost vigilance and solicitude. Opinions may differ as to what should be the form and constitution of the corporate body through which the principles of local self-government ought in any particular place to act, but there is practical unanimity regarding

the necessity of preserving it, and stimulating its operation, wherever local conditions afford opportunity and scope for its exercise. Although the important problem of municipal government, now awaiting solution in London, has increased in difficulty and complexity with the rapid and unprecedented growth of the metropolis, it is not by any means a new one.

In 1853 a Royal Commission was appointed to inquire into the constitution, order, and government of the Corporation, and to consider whether any measures were necessary to make better provisions for the government of the City. The Lord Mayor of that day, in giving evidence before the commission, expressed his opinion that since the legislature had decided to enfranchise portions of the Metropolis for political purposes, it ought to complete the work, and enfranchise for municipal purposes also, by creating separate municipalities in truest accordance with the principles of local self-government, which a monster municipality would annihilate by subjecting the communities of the Metropolis to a great assembly, caring but little for their local affairs.

The two methods of dealing with metropolitan municipal government thus alluded to, namely unification on the one hand and federated municipalities on the other, indicate the question which then was, and still is, the fundamental one for settlement. The chief difficulties to be grappled with in the solution of the problem arise out of the importance of the City in relation to the rest of the Metropolis, and the amplitude of the whole Metropolitan area and population.

The Metropolis embraces the City of London and the County of London, which last consists of portions of the counties of Middlesex, Surrey, and Kent combined together. The whole Metropolis has been well described as

“a province covered with houses, having a diameter from north to south, and from east to west, so great that the persons living at its extremities have few interests in common; each inhabitant being in general acquainted only with his own quarter, and having no minute knowledge of other parts of the town.”

The Metropolis is under two systems of municipal government—that of the City Corporation, and that of the London County Council.

Referring in the first place to that of the City, it is to be observed that, although the area of the City only consists of about one square mile, its antiquity and historical associations, privileges, revenues, and unique commercial position as the greatest, most crowded, and wealthiest commercial emporium in the world, combine to give it paramount importance in the Metropolitan system. Although its sleeping or caretaking population is not more than 38,000, its day or business population amounts to over 300,000; and this great difference in numbers has become more marked as the City has increased in prosperity. In fact, adopting the language of Lord Macaulay :

“ Lombard Street and Threadneedle Street are merely places where men toil and accumulate. They go elsewhere to enjoy and to spend. On a Sunday, or in an evening after the hours of business, some courts and alleys, which a few hours before had been alive with hurrying feet and anxious faces, are as silent as the glades of a forest.”

It should be noted in passing that this change in the character of city life is not confined to London, but is observable in a lesser degree in various large cities and towns of the United Kingdom. In other places, however, the central business population and the surrounding residential population are enumerated together in the taking of the municipal census ; but in the City of London, for occult reasons, the plan adopted by the government, of “ numbering the people,” practically ignores the most important business population in the world.

The daily vehicular traffic, to and from the City, represents nearly 100,000 conveyances ; and the pedestrians who cross the four City bridges number approximately 280,000. The ratable value of the City has during the present century advanced beyond precedent. In 1801 it was £507,372, and in 1893 it had risen to £4,153,930. As compared with the ratable value of other incorporated cities and towns, the City of London far exceeds that of the whole of Liverpool ; is more than £1,000,000 in advance of Manchester ; is £500,000 more than Birmingham and Leeds combined, and is about equal to the aggregate ratable values of Sheffield, Bradford, Bristol, and Nottingham, and is nearly tenfold that of Blackburn or Bolton. The relative importance of the City will further appear by reference to the profits derived from trades, professions, etc., assessed to income tax, as compared with the assessment of the County of London. In 1889—

1890 the assessment to income tax of the City was £28,796,000 more than that of the County.

What has now been stated regarding the business population, the ratable value, and the magnitude of the mercantile and pecuniary transactions carried on in the City, taken together with its unique history and central position, seems "to render its comprehension in a general measure of municipal regulation a matter of extreme difficulty, and to point it out as a fit subject for separate and special legislation."

The claims of the City to peculiar consideration at the hands of the municipal reformer, must surely be enhanced, when some of the public works and improvements, which the Corporation has executed in London in quite modern times and the expenditure connected therewith, are remembered; for example, widening and improving the thoroughfares near Temple Bar, the Strand, and Holborn, at a cost of nearly £250,000; providing a site for the General Post-Office, costing £80,000; forming and improving the approaches to new London bridge at an expense exceeding £1,020,000; the removal of Fleet Market and the formation of Farringdon Street, £250,000; enlarging the Royal Exchange and improving the adjoining streets, £230,000; erecting a new Coal Exchange, £122,000; forming new streets from St. Paul's Cathedral to King William Street and new Cannon Street, £540,000; preserving 6,500 acres of open space in the neighborhood of London, for the perpetual use and enjoyment of the people, £341,000; building the Holborn Valley Viaduct, and the improvements connected therewith, nearly one and three-quarter millions; and the last, but not the least, of the City's gifts to London is the Tower Bridge, which, though costing more than a million sterling, is acknowledged to be worth the large outlay.

The advantage to the public at large of the General Post Office and the open spaces is self-evident, and the funds disbursed in connection with the other works and improvements have similarly been productive of benefit to the whole Metropolitan population, since by means thereof the City Corporation has provided, enlarged, and improved channels for the ebb and flow of the great human tide which daily surges in and out of the civic centre.

All of the before-mentioned works of public utility have been provided by the Corporation for the common good without any

cost whatever, either direct or indirect, to the ratepayer, and have involved an aggregate expenditure of over five and a half millions sterling ; defrayed (excepting the cost of the Tower Bridge and of the open spaces) chiefly out of the ancient, but now extinct, coal duty of 4d. per ton levied by the Corporation almost from time immemorial on coal brought into the port of London. The Tower Bridge was erected out of moneys raised on the revenues of the Bridge House estates, which have belonged to the Corporation from a remote antiquity, and have furnished funds for the building and maintenance of the city bridges. The 6,500 acres of open spaces were acquired as lungs and recreation grounds for "Greater London" by means of the revenues produced by the old duties, which for centuries the Corporation was entitled to receive in respect of grain and other measurable articles brought into the port of London.

The good record of the Corporation of London is not confined to the material benefits which it has conferred on the Metropolis. It has done so much on behalf of the liberties of the country that the Historian of the Constitution (Mr. Hallam) eulogizes it as "this stronghold of popular liberty." And Sir George Grey, when introducing his bill in 1856, for the better regulation of the Corporation of London, referred to the services which it had rendered to the cause of civil and religious liberty and of constitutional government, as entitling it to be treated with all possible respect and consideration.

Passing now to the County of London : It comprises an area of 120 square miles, with a population of some four and a quarter millions ; and is under the municipal jurisdiction of the London County Council, as well as of forty subordinated vestries and district boards. These are ancillary and local bodies, and have with few exceptions existed since 1855, in which year they were, by the Metropolis Management Act, subjected to the controlling authority of the Metropolitan Board of Works. That Board was created by the same statute, and the whole main drainage system of the Metropolis was placed under its superintendence. It consisted of forty-three members, three of whom were elected by the City Corporation, and the rest by the vestries and district boards. Although the Metropolitan Board of Works passed in 1888 to the limbo of discredited institutions, in favor of the London County Council, what it and the vestries accomplished for the Metropolis

will give them a lasting fame which their successors may well emulate.

The late Mr. Bottomley Firth, who was no friend of the Board or the Vestries, said :

“With all their faults, and they are many, the Vestries have done much for London ; any comparison drawn between our condition to-day (1876) and our condition twenty years ago, in any single matter under Vestry control, abundantly proves this. When the board began their work the condition of the London sewerage was very different from what it is now. The main drainage system of London is now the best of any on the face of the globe.”

By means of it nearly 200 million gallons of sewage from the most populous capital in the world are daily disposed of.

The next great achievement of the Board was the embankment of the north side of the Thames, from Blackfriars Bridge to Westminster. It was accomplished in 1862 at a cost of £1,157,000, defrayed by the Corporation out of its coal dues. This splendid work, to quote Mr. Firth's language again, “will stand as a monument of the engineering skill of those who constructed it, as long as London shall last.”

It is worthy of notice here that the building by the Corporation, as before mentioned, of the Holborn Valley Viaduct, occurred in 1861—the year before the embankment of the Thames by the Board of Works. It will thus appear that these two splendid and most useful works were executed by the Corporation and the board—at that time the two great municipal bodies of the Metropolis—without any clashing of jurisdictions, when London was not under that unified system of local government which some think to be the panacea for all municipal ills.

In the year 1888 the Local Government Act was passed substituting the present London County Council for the Metropolitan Board ; and special exemption clauses were introduced for the protection of the Corporation.

An important difference between the Board of Works and the County Council consists in the fact that instead of the Vestries and the District Boards sending their own representatives to the County Council, as they formerly did to the Board of Works, so producing unity of action between the central and the local authorities, the members of the Council, as well as of the Vestries and District Boards, are now chosen directly by the rate-payers, and thus the connecting link between the Council and the local authorities is lost.

Many abortive attempts have been made in Parliament to deal with the question of the municipal government of London; from that of Sir George Grey in 1856, to that of Sir William Harcourt in 1884. The latter brought in the London Government Bill of that year, which proceeded on the principle of unification, and failed to become law. The latest experiment in London government was presented last year, when the Government appointed a Royal Commission "to consider the conditions under which the amalgamation of the City and County of London could be effected, and to make specific and practical proposals for that purpose."

From 1853 down to 1884 the better opinion seems to have been in favor of separate federated municipalities, but in 1884 the craze for vastness and unification had set in, and appeared in Sir William Harcourt's bill of that year. It can also be traced in the Local Government Act of 1888, and is last seen in threatening activity in the Royal Commission of 1883. Experience seems to show that the cost of governing very large populations and areas by a centralized system is most burdensome to the people.

The expenditure of the London County Council during the first year of its administration (1889) was £1,617,000, whilst the amount which the ratepayers will have to find for the year ending 31st March, 1895, is £1,972,000. In 1849 the Municipal Budget of Paris was £1,640,000, and the population was 946,000. In 1860, when the population was 1,800,000, the City Budget rose to £4,160,000, and in 1883 the expenditure of the city reached the sum of £10,400,000 sterling, the population then being two and a quarter millions.

New York, containing a population of over one and a half millions, is taxed over thirty-three millions of dollars per annum, or nearly twenty-two dollars per head of the population. A municipal government of excessive magnitude is not only wasteful and expensive, but popular control over the administration is proportionately diminished.

Professor Goldwin Smith has well said :

"It is strange that statesmen should not by this time have seen that genuine election by a huge district, the inhabitants of which are strangers to each other, is a moral impossibility. The inevitable outcome is the ward politician with his machinery for collecting votes."

New York and Paris proclaim with warning voice that the



biggest things in local government are not very different from the biggest failures. In the case of the British metropolis, the evils of a centralizing system would probably, in course of time, become aggravated beyond all precedent because of the enormous numbers of the population and the vast magnitude of the interests which would come under its jurisdiction. A further argument against one municipality for the whole Metropolis arises from its division by the River Thames, and cannot be better stated than in the words of the Royal Commissioners of 1853, who said :

“ The bisection of London by the Thames furnishes an additional reason for not placing the whole town under a single municipal corporation. All roads, streets, sewers, gas-pipes, and water-pipes—in short, all means of superficial or subterranean communication—which run in continuous lines from north to south, are necessarily stopped by the river. Many of these are directly or indirectly the subjects of Municipal control, and therefore a Municipal body which governed the Metropolis both north and south of the Thames would find that the continuity of its operations was in many respects interrupted by natural circumstances.”

The Commissioners further said that—

“ If an attempt were made to give a Municipal organization to the entire Metropolis, by a wider extension of the present boundaries of the City, the utility of the Corporation as an institution suited to its limited area would be destroyed ;”

and they saw

“ no reason why the benefit of municipal institutions should not be extended to the rest of the Metropolis by its division into municipal districts, each forming a municipal government of its own.”

The two methods of dealing with the London problem, namely, unification with centralization, as opposed to decentralization with federated municipalities, still show the chief line of cleavage in the views of the leaders of thought on municipal questions. Lord Rosebery and Sir William Harcourt appear to favor unification and centralization ; whilst Lord Salisbury, Mr. Arthur James Balfour, Mr. Chamberlain, and Prof. Goldwin Smith, following men like Sir George Cornwall Lewis, Sir George Grey, and Mr. John Stuart Mill, think “ that the full advantages of municipal life cannot be obtained ” for London unless the vast metropolitan area be divided into municipalities which shall “ deal with all those subjects which are not, from the nature of the case, necessarily under the control of a central body.” The experience of smaller municipalities, like Birming-

ham, seems now to be against further extension, for, as Mr. Chamberlain said recently in Parliament,

“Even our provincial municipalities are growing to such an extent, that it will be impossible for them to remain under one system of self-government.”

If that argument applies to municipalities like Birmingham, with populations of less than half a million, how much more will it apply to the Metropolis, with a population ten times greater—a population about as large as Ireland’s, larger than that of Scotland, and thrice as large as that of Wales? No such experiment in municipal government has ever been attempted, as that of placing the English metropolis under a unified system; and the question naturally arises, Is London such an exception to all other places that absolutely no limit exists to the population and area over which the progressive spirits of the capital can efficiently rule? Mr. Chamberlain affirms that

“A population of half a million is practically the largest number that can be governed from one centre, with the individual attention and constant assiduity that have contributed so much to the usefulness and popularity of corporation work.”

Assuming (as may safely be done on so high an authority) that these words are not far from the truth, what shall be said of the failure which must also certainly follow an attempt to perform the task on a scale of tenfold magnitude?

Decentralization is an indispensable condition of the good local government of heterogeneous populations like those included within the Metropolitan ambit, because without it two of the most necessary conditions of efficiency, namely, “minute local knowledge and community of interests,” would be wanting.

If for the metropolis of the empire a municipal organization shall be devised, constituting free self-governing communities, working together with concurrent action under a superintending central control, and dignified by association with the ancient Civic Government, which is “a relic of a great age in our national story,” London may again become to the Londoner “what Athens was to the Athenian of the age of Pericles—what Florence was to the Florentine of the fifteenth century. The citizen was proud of the grandeur of his city, punctilious about her claims to respect, ambitious of her offices, and zealous for her franchises.”

GEORGE ROBERT TYLER, Lord Mayor.